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ABSTRACT

The fall of Gary Hart, brought about because of his indiscretions during the 1988 presidential campaign, should not be treated exclusively as a consequence of Hart's moral failings. Rather, the fall of Hart can be traced to a complex of factors including bad judgment, the near total control that the press exercises over the political agenda, and most important, failed apologia. His apologetic strategies would have been well-adapted to a situation in which a candidate had been accused of some moral failing about which most of the people did not care. In such a situation it would have been smart for him largely to ignore the specifics in his major campaign speeches and instead attempt to rise above the conflict. Here, however, the issue was not adultery, but bad judgment, and Hart's strategies were ill-adapted to such a problem. An analysis of Hart's failed apologia suggests several implications for generic approaches to apologia. First, while a generic treatment of apologia has much to recommend itself, such an approach is always limited by context. Second, while any number of critics focus on the situational basis of rhetorical genres, there clearly are limits on the value of such an approach. Finally, there is danger associated with any set of general critical categories, no matter how valuable those categories may be. (Twenty-two references are appended.) (MS)

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The Fall and Fall of Gary Hart

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The Fall and the Fall of Gary Hart

On the surface what happened to Gary Hart seems very obvious. He got caught metaphorically and almost literally with his pants down. In this view, Hart's indiscretions with Donna Rice and other women combined with a number of other questions about character involving his age, name, and so forth to destroy an otherwise promising campaign. It was not just that people did not approve of Hart, but that he seemed laughable. He seemed to be more the butt of endless jokes than a serious candidate for president of the United States. For example, the New York Times reported that after his re-entry into the race, a member of the crowd yelled out "Hey, Gary, how's Donna Rice?" (Dowd, "In Reborn Quest" A1). And CBS correspondent Bob Schiefer was quoted as saying that he "did not 'know a single person in politics outside of the Hart family' who thought he might win" (cited in Rosenthal D12).

At the same time, the judgment that Gary Hart simply got caught having an affair and consequently was knocked out of the race is simplistic. Certainly, Hart's position was bad, but it was not hopeless. The fall of Gary Hart should not be treated exclusively as a consequence of Hart's moral failings. Rather, the fall of Hart can be traced to a complex of factors including bad judgment, the near total control that the press exercises over the political agenda, and most important from our perspective, failed apologia.

In order to develop this argument, I will proceed through three stages. First, I will consider the view that Hart's position simply was hopeless. Second, I will analyze key works from Hart's second campaign to demonstrate the rhetorical dimensions of Hart's failure. Third, I will try to explain both what led to the collapse of Hart's campaign and also draw implications from his failed apologia for our understanding of apologia in general.

Hart's Options

In retrospect, it may seem clear that the combination of the revelations concerning Donna Rice and other "character" problems doomed the Hart campaign. After all Hart was forced to resign from his first campaign in only a matter of days, following the first coverage of his relationship with Donna Rice. And the second campaign went nowhere.

The conventional wisdom that Hart was doomed may, however, be flawed. There are several good reasons to believe that had Hart handled the situation differently the result also might have been different. First, Hart was not caught. There were any number of accusations about Hart's actions with Donna Rice and others, but there was no hard proof. And Hart did have an explanation, although it was somewhat difficult to believe. Hart's claim that Rice had not spent the night with him, but had left through the back

door was one that the Miami Herald could not disprove. And he could have hung tough on the claim that Rice was just a friend, who he had met in the campaign. A narrative analysis of the story undoubtedly would reveal that it did not "ring true," but surely the "story" that Nixon told in the Checkers speech also did not ring true. With a little help from his wife, he might have made it credible.

Second, public attitudes about morality in general and sexual practices in particular have changed considerably over the last decades. For example, Macleans cited the opinions of several average people that Hart's personal life "doesn't have anything to do with his political views" (McDonald 21). The New York Times cited the opinion of other average citizens who responded to Hart's problems by commenting, "'Who hasn't got somebody in a closet?'" (Dowd, "Hart's Campaign" D26). A Gallup/Nation poll found data backing up these anecdotal comments. It revealed that "a large segment of Democratic voters . . . do not regard Hart's philandering, much as they may disapprove of it as a disqualification for the presidency" (Navasky 112). A New York Times poll found a similar result (Meislin B6). In addition, revelations about the personal lives of Franklin Roosevelt, John Kennedy, and others led a number of commentators to wonder whether personal morality and public service were closely related (vanden Heuvel). For many, the key issue was not whether Gary Hart had an affair with Donna Rice, but what his handling of the situation revealed about

his character. The issue was not Gary Hart's affair, but Gary Hart's capacity to manage the affairs of state. And it would seem that on this issue, Hart had any number of possible approaches.

A third factor relates to the public's somewhat inconsistent reaction to political scandals. While there was great interest in Hart's various escapades (the National Enquirer photos of Donna Rice on Hart's lap were widely reprinted), there also was a strong feeling that the press in general and the Miami Herald in particular had overstepped the bounds of both good taste and good journalism. For example, a New York Times/CBS poll found that about 60% of the people felt that the Miami Herald's surveillance of Hart was "'unfairly probing into a candidate's's private life'" (Meislin A1). The public reaction to Hart's angry attacks on the media led Thomas Griffith to note in Time that "Some editors feared that the media's pursuit of Hart's private life might become as much an issues as his adulteries" (79).

Finally, when Hart re-entered the race in December 1987 he retained considerable support. For example, a New York Times/CBS poll found that in mid-December 1987 Hart was still the frontrunner. While 21% of Democratic voters favored Hart and 17% favored Jackson, at that point only 9% favored Dukakis (Dionne, "Poll Shows" B16). Another poll found that Hart led the field in Iowa ("Hart Leaps Ahead"). And for a few days the campaign seemed to be going well.

For example, the New York Times reported that "Hart seemed to be hitting his stride" and even claimed that Hart's re-entry into the race had scared the campaign staffs of the other candidates (Dowd "Democrats Seem Wary" II, 10). As late as mid-January, Hart seemed to be producing strong public reaction (Dowd "Hart's Campaign" D 26). Macleans claimed that "Gary Hart appears at the moment to be on a roll" (Bruning 9). These factors led John McLaughlin to comment, "Don't write off Gary Hart" (24). Similarly, prior to Hart's return to the race, Victor Navasky argued that Hart might be able to successfully re-enter the race. And as savvy a political observer as William Safire observed that "there is at least a chance that the new underdog Hart will upset the favored Dukakis and Simon [in New Hampshire]" (A35).

All of this suggests that the conventional wisdom that Hart's campaign was doomed by the various revelations about Donna Rice is too simplistic. The public still has great respect for John Kennedy, although it is now common knowledge that he was, like Hart, a womanizer. And Hart had a chance to tap strong anti-media feelings among the general public. Finally, Hart had a considerable cushion in terms of popular support that he could have used to maintain or later re-create his campaign. Clearly, Hart's failure to use these potential advantages merits close consideration.

The Failed Apologia in Hart's Second Campaign

Initially, a focus on the apologia in Hart's second campaign, rather than the first, may seem odd. After all it was Hart's rhetorical failure and subsequent withdrawal from the race that required apologia in the second campaign. However, there are good reasons to focus upon the second Hart campaign, rather than the first. Hart was forced from the race by a firestorm of media attention. He found himself answering explicit questions about his marriage and morality at press conferences. There simply was so much media attention that the situation seemed hopeless. In this context, Hart made any number of poor choices. For example, Hart combined a denial that he had spent the night with Donna Rice with a refusal to answer a question about whether he had committed adultery. He justified that refusal to answer the question based on the different "theological" definitions of adultery (Dionne "Wife Joins Hart" A1). This answer was particularly lame. If he was going to deny wrong-doing he shouldn't have hesitated. Yet, if he was going to explain his actions, he shouldn't pretend that he was completely pure. In other words, Hart's first set of responses to the various charges relating to Donna Rice, only can be called inept. Hart concocted unbelievable stories and refused to answer questions and consequently undercut his credibility.

At the same time, Hart's errors surely do not prove that such a failure was inevitable. The degree to which he retained public support following his withdrawal from the race certainly suggests that a more effective apologetic strategy could have been constructed. The place to check for such a strategy is in Hart's second campaign. A consideration of the apologetic strategies in the second campaign is also interesting in that after Hart's campaign was left for dead, public doubts about the remaining Democratic candidates combined with the other factors I have mentioned to give Hart a chance to return to the race. He had that rarest of political opportunities, a chance to return to the land of the living from that of the politically dead.

A consideration of Hart's rhetoric in his second campaign reveals a consistent use of a few dominant strategies. The most obvious place to begin the description of any apologia is with the Ware and Linkugel typology of strategies typically found in apologia. What is most interesting in this case is that Hart systematically avoids denial as a strategy. He does not act as if he had anything to explain. Rather, he relies on one major strategy from each of the other three categories, bolstering, transcendence and differentiation. He bolsters his credentials by speaking of what he believes to be his unique leadership abilities. He attempts to transcend the situation by speaking of the crucial issues that cannot be

dealt with, absent his vision. Finally, he uses the classic differentiation strategy of speaking about the growth that he has gone through, since the first campaign. In other words, that was then, this is now.

These strategies are quite apparent in two works that typify his second campaign, the December 16, 1987 speech in Concord New Hampshire announcing his re-entry into the race and his basic stump speech "There's No Challenge That the American Mind Collectively Cannot Solve.'" For example, in the first words of the speech in Concord, Hart emphasizes the importance of leadership, "I believe I represent a brand of leadership that draws its strength from its independence, that's experienced in politics but is not purely political." Later in the same speech he justifies his re-entry into the race both because national leaders have not entered the race and because his "new ideas" have been ignored. In other words, Hart claims that he must return to the race because the other candidates lack the breadth of his vision. This is especially apparent in his conclusion:

This will not be like any campaign you've ever seen, because I am going directly to the people. I don't have a national headquarters or a staff. I don't have any money. I don't have pollsters or consultants or media advisers or political endorsements.

But I have something even better. I have the power of ideas and I can govern this country.

Similarly, in his basic stump Hart also emphasizes the uniqueness of his leadership. Early in the address he refers to the "lack of real leadership" in this country. This leadership gap is all the more important given that we now face problems which are "unique in this nation's history." After sketching this situation he refers to his "sabbatical" from politics and claims that "it may turn out, at least where I'm concerned, to have been one of the best things that ever happened," because it allowed him to break away from the "rat race" and gain "a new perspective." Clearly, Hart is claiming that his unique vision justifies his election as president. Implicitly, Hart is suggesting that true leadership is far more important than a little marital infidelity.

Closely related to bolstering his own leadership abilities, Hart claims that the issues facing the campaign transcend questions of personal character. In the speech in Concord, Hart emphasizes that "traditional politics" is no longer adequate for dealing with this nation's problems. He then mentions the stockmarket crash, the situation in the Persian Gulf, and the difficulty of confronting Gorbachev as evidence that the issues are so important that traditional questions of character pale in importance. Later he justifies his re-entry into the race based on the goal of needing a President who can serve as "the nation's first teacher to help our people understand some very tough

problems and how together we can solve them." The issues are so important that he must return to the race.

The basic campaign speech relies on a similar strategy. He discusses a variety of crucial issues, taxes, infrastructure, Iran-contra, and implicitly argues that these problems are so serious that new leadership is needed, "leadership that's courageous enough to break from the pack, not head for its center"

Finally, while ignoring all details of the various events involving Donna Rice and others, Hart clearly attempts to convince the people that over the course of his seven month "sabbatical" he has matured. As I noted earlier, in the basic stump speech he emphasizes that his seven month break from the campaign gave him a "new perspective" on the campaign. In the conclusion, he claims that "A strength which becomes clearer and stronger through its experience of such obstacles is the only strength which can conquer them [the obstacles]." He also places his campaign in the context of the eternal struggle for justice, "And I invite you, each one of you personally to join me, if not in a political campaign, in a campaign to give some things back to this nation. Because political candidates come and go but I believe the struggle for justice is eternal." In the Concord speech, Hart gets at the same theme in a somewhat different way. Toward the end, he emphasizes that the decision to re-enter the race was made jointly with his family. Hart says:

Getting back in this race is about the toughest thing that I have ever done. And believe me it is not done lightly. My family, Lee, John and Andrea understand clearly the difficulties that lie ahead. And they are totally behind this step, because we believe in ourselves and we believe in the American people.

This passage at first seems unimportant, simply a general endorsement of family values. A closer look suggests however, that Hart embeds a subtle enthymeme in his position. He seems to be implying that if his family has forgiven him and wants him to run, he must have changed. This same strategy is also apparent in the many joint appearances that Hart made with his wife at the beginning of the second campaign.

The strategies that I have described are clearly similar to those found in many apologia. In this case, however, they seem curiously inadequate. Given the situation which Hart faced, a critic is tempted to echo Walter Mondale's question to Gary Hart in the 1984 campaign, "Where's the beef?" One expects to find a detailed defense of his actions, or a biting attack on the press, or a contrite apology for acting foolishly. Actually, I would have expected all of the above. But they are not there. And they are not there despite the fact that in interview settings Hart continued to be pushed about his character (Oreskes). It was Donna Rice, not his ideas, that continued to make headlines.

Here, I want to suggest that Hart completely mis-read the situation. He saw voter dissatisfaction with the so-called "six dwarfs" running for the nomination. He also saw considerable anger toward the media. Finally, he saw that for much of the public his romantic life was not a big issue. Hart apparently reasoned from this circumstance that he could rise above the Donna Rice scandal and return to the race based on the strength of his ideas and vision. What Hart did not recognize was that the main problem related not to whether he had had affairs, but to the quality of his judgment. As the New York Times editorialized, "the central source of alarm about Mr. Hart's behavior was not his willingness to see other women but his readiness to run reckless risks" ("The Beef" A34).

Viewed in such a context, the failure of Hart's second campaign is completely understandable. Hart either completely mis-read the situation or did not care. (Perhaps he just wanted the matching money to pay his campaign debts). In any case, his apologetic strategies would have been well-adapted to a situation in which a candidate had been accused of some moral failing about which most of the people did not care. In such a situation it would have been smart for him largely to ignore the specifics in his major campaign speeches and instead attempt to rise above the conflict. Here, however, the issue was not adultery, but bad judgment and Hart's strategies were ill-adapted to such a problem. In fact, the strategies seemed almost

certain to add to public questions about his judgment. Put simply, Hart comes across as quite arrogant. He claims that only he has the vision, new ideas, and leadership to deal with the problems of the day. He seems to be saying essentially, "I'm so damn smart and the other candidates are so weak that only a fool would care about my personal life." In other words, his strategies seemed to suggest a belief that the normal rules should not apply to him. Such a strategy could not hope to succeed.

Hart's situation was not impossible. It is possible that Hart could have been successful in the second campaign. Most of all he needed to show the American people that he had learned the lesson that hubris leads to disaster. In making this point Hart could have combined the following types of strategies. First, he needed both to apologize and to deny any wrong-doing, if that was ethically possible for him. Hart's most important mistake was that he did not immediately admit that he had been stupid to challenge the press to search his private life. He then should have admitted that he liked having attractive women friends, but denied that he had committed any morally unacceptable acts. He should have said something like, "There is no question that I have been dumb. I placed myself in a position where people naturally would mis-perceive the situation. I have acted irresponsibly and have learned something from it. However, I deny that I have done anything wrong. My wife and I have a strong marriage that has been through a lot.

It was not always strong and when we were separated and having problems I did see a number of women. But that is between Lee and myself. As long as she accepts me and I do not compromise my governmental responsibilities, who I choose for my friends is none of anyone else's business."

Second, Hart needed to pitch his attack on the press in a somewhat different way. He needed to say that he resented the personal invasion of his privacy and then add that many in the press do not responsibly apply their power. He could have said, "The key issue in this campaign is whether I would be a good leader as president. I do not see that my relationship with female friends has much to bear on this subject. And if one's personal life is a crucial indicator of professional competence, then don't the major media leaders have a responsibility to inform the people about all aspects of their personal lives? If Ted Koppel has a responsibility to ask me about my relationship with my wife, then shouldn't you ask Ted Koppel about his relationship with women because such information could bear on his ability as a journalist?" Third, Hart should have held an unlimited press conference in which he first allowed the press to ask any question about his personal life and then at the end of the conference explained how some of the questions were both offensive and irrelevant. Hart could have said, "See, I have come clean with you. Now, would you please get off my back. Yes, I like to spend time with

attractive women. As long as Lee doesn't care, what business is it of yours?"

Hart had many of the right strategies, but he was far too defensive and waited too long to directly confront the issue. And in the second campaign, his strategies seemed designed to increase public doubts about his intellectual arrogance.

Conclusion

The foregoing analysis of the failed apologia of Gary Hart suggests several implications for generic approaches to apologia. First, while a generic treatment of apologia has much to recommend itself, such an approach is always limited by context. The strategies that Hart used in his second campaign might have been effective in a different circumstance. But they were particularly ineffective in this circumstance, because they were not adapted to the specifics of the situation facing Hart. In a general sense, people facing claims of moral turpitude (Edward Kennedy, Gary Hart, and others) confront similar situations and consequently produce works sharing similar strategies. These general similarities, however, are may be out-weighted by the specific differences that can be traced to particular constraints and also rhetorical error.

Second, while any number of critics focus on the situational basis of rhetorical genres (Campbell and

Jamieson; Miller), there clearly are limits on the value of such an approach. The situation calling for an apologia is far more constraining than virtually any other rhetorical situation. With this said, however, there are relatively few similarities that can be found in all apologetic works. For example, the National Enquirer pictures of Donna Rice on Gary Hart's lap undoubtedly had a major effect on Hart's various attempts at apologia. Yet, surely such an incident cannot be treated as a general aspect of all situations producing apologia.

Another way of getting at the same point is to note that there are no strict rules for what makes a good apologia. A strategy that works in one circumstance may fail miserably in another. This situation suggests that a search for general characteristics shared by all apologia may not be especially valuable. If I am correct about this analysis, then it may not be correct to think of apologia as a genre in the strict sense outlined by Campbell and Jamieson. The situation is not sufficiently constraining to encourage speakers to choose any single or group of strategies. Rather, they choose the strategy that appears to make the most sense given the specifics of the situation. There is, after all, a big difference between defending yourself against the charge that you are a liberal and defending yourself against the charge that you have committed some terrible crime. The foregoing suggests that

the term "apologia" is most useful as a general subject-related category for treating speeches of self defense.

Finally, the analysis of Hart's second campaign suggests the danger's associated with any set of general critical categories, no matter how valuable those categories may be. For example, there is no question that the critical terminology originally developed by Ware and Linkugel and later applied by a number of critics has value. It can serve as a general set of categories for comparing all apologia. At the same time, the mere existence of the categories may encourage critics to force various works into them. In this case, for example, Hart's strategies in the second campaign clearly fit within the strategy types outlined by Ware and Linkugel. But absent more specific analysis of how those strategy types responded to the specifics of the situation facing Hart, the mere discovery of the strategy types is not useful. Of course, Ware and Linkugel did not intend to create a critical terminology that would exhaust the study of apologia. Rather, they defended their work as a trial balloon that might reveal some similarities and differences among all apologetic works.

However, the mere existence of such a critical terminology may obscure as much as it reveals. For example, Hart relied quite heavily on attacking the press for their coverage of his personal life. I suppose that those attacks could be labelled an appeal to transcendence, but wouldn't

it be better to simply say that Hart drew on the perception that many members of the press had crossed the line between reporting the news and invading someone's personal privacy. The point is that the mere existence of the critical terminology may function as a set of blinders influencing the critic's analysis of the work.

An additional example may make this point clearer. Certainly, one of Hart's most important mistakes was that he did not explicitly apologize to the American people for his actions. However, since the strategy of literally apologizing for one's mistakes does not not clearly fit within any of the Ware and Linkugel category types, it is easy to see how a critic might either ignore such an admission of error or force that strategy into one of the other categories. Here, I do not deny in any way the value of the Ware and Linkugel typology. They created it to discuss similarities found across a wide variety of apologia. However, like any critical system, it serves as a set of critical blinders. In Burke's terms it both selects and deflects. It is that selection and deflection that may cause a critic to miss the unique characteristics of a particular text.

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